

Statement

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium

Presented by Dr. Gerald “Carty” Monette
AIHEC Executive Committee Officer of the AIHEC Board of Directors
and
President, Turtle Mountain Community College
Belcourt, North Dakota

The United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

July 1, 1999

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Chairman Campbell, Vice Chairman Inouye, Members of the Committee and staff, on behalf of this nation's 31 Tribal Colleges, which comprise the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), thank you for the opportunity to share our recommendations regarding the legislation to establish an American Indian Education Foundation introduced by the Vice Chair of this Committee, Senator Inouye. My name is Carty Monette, and I am president of Turtle Mountain Community College on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in Belcourt, North Dakota, and I have been a leader in the Tribal College Movement since 1972.

As you know, the Tribal College Movement began more than 30 years ago for a very simple reason: to open the doors to higher education opportunities to under-served American Indian people living on highly isolated and economically depressed reservations. Over the past three decades, tribal leaders realized that only through local, culturally relevant, and holistic methods could many American Indians succeed in higher education. The financial and psychological costs of sending students from their reservations to colleges that did not understand and were not prepared to meet the basic needs of American Indian students were too high. The Tribal Colleges now serve more than 25,000 students each year, offering primarily two-year degrees, with four colleges offering four-year and two that offer graduate degrees. Together, we are proud to say that we represent the most significant and successful development in American Indian education history, promoting achievement among students who would otherwise never know educational success.

The Tribal College relationship with the Bureau of Indian Affairs was formalized in 1978, with the passage of the Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act. However, this relationship has not always been a solid one; notwithstanding our Act's placement within BIA, the Bureau rarely advocates on behalf of the Tribal Colleges and Universities. We are concerned that the Bureau did not consult with us as the concept for this Foundation was developed, despite our long history of advancing educational progress and providing community services to American Indians of all ages. We believe that this legislation— to establish a foundation to encourage, process and distribute gifts of real and personal property and income in support of the education goals of the BIA's Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP) – should carefully be examined and expanded upon to include Tribal Colleges and Universities and to support the strengthening and expansion of the important education and family support efforts already in place at our institutions.

In addition, we hope that BIA involves the White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities in future planning for the Foundation. One of the primary goals of the Initiative, created through Executive Order 13021, is to encourage innovative linkages between the tribal

colleges, early childhood programs and elementary and high schools. Such involvement on the part of the White House Initiative would also ensure that another key component for the Tribal College Executive Order is met, which is to help ensure, through coordinated public-private efforts, that greater federal and private sector resources are available to the Tribal Colleges on an ongoing basis.

Recognizing Our Contributions/Best Practices

The Tribal Colleges have made enormous contributions to their communities and to Indian Country in general, and we believe these contributions could help in determining best practices and focused need areas for the proposed Foundation's support. Three specific concepts are important to learn from and include:

Supporting Life-Long Learning. Current education reforms have focused on the integration of all levels of education, by building bridges between early childhood education, elementary/secondary schools and post-secondary institutions. In many of these reform efforts, communities and schools work with nearby higher education institutions to develop a "seamless web" that serves overall educational needs. Therefore, while the Tribal Colleges support the development of the proposed American Indian Education Foundation, our member institutions are concerned that the projects to be funded may not support this integrative approach. Although not specifically stated in the legislation, BIA officials indicate that the Foundation will support various education projects from early childhood through high school. Yet our experience shows a dramatic need to support integrated approaches such as providing adult basic education to parents, while offering child care and educational services to their children.

Long ago, officials at Tribal Colleges and Universities realized the need to develop preschool programs and outreach to K-12 school systems. Some of these efforts include the creation of child care programs, teacher training programs including training for Head Start instructors, the development of culturally specific curriculum, pre-college preparatory programs, and the establishment of school-to-work programs.

Tribal Colleges and Universities have had a dramatic impact on the present generation of American Indians, drawing entire families into college attendance, often despite a history of high educational failure at both the elementary and secondary level. Many of our students reach our doors with reading and math skills at the ninth-or tenth-grade level, indicating deficiencies in their prior school experiences. A recent editorial in the Tribal College Journal asked, "Why would the tribal colleges direct their resources at younger students when they are chronically underfunded for their college programs? These are their children and grandchildren, their communities, their future, and they are in serious trouble." The legislation suggests that the Foundation will support efforts "to undertake and conduct such other activities as will further the educational opportunities of present and future generations of American Indians." The Tribal Colleges have model outreach programs already in place – yet our chronic underfunding threatens these programs. Expansion of the eligible institutions that may access the Foundations' funds to include the Tribal Colleges and Universities makes good sense, as indicated by the following examples of our partnerships with elementary and secondary schools.

An example is the “Making Reading Meaningful and Memorable (M&M) Club” at Sitting Bull College, in Fort Yates, ND, is an afterschool reading program for first graders on the Standing Rock Reservation. Created by the Elementary Education Department at SBC in response to the U.S. Department of Education’s America Reads Challenge, the M&M Club meets three days a week, after school. Ellen Murphy, an Elementary/Special Education instructor at SBC explained, “Parental participation provides the opportunity for parents to learn how to help their child enjoy reading.” Parents are required to actively participate with their child in a minimum of three sessions during the semester, but they are strongly encouraged to meet with the club on a regular basis.

Another exemplary program of Tribal College outreach efforts to elementary and secondary school children and their families is the Tribal College Rural Systemic Initiative (TCRSI). Supported through the National Science Foundation and administered by my institution, Turtle Mountain Community College, TCRSI supports more than 100 schools (K-14) in a six-state region among 20 Indian nations. Each nation is promoting science, mathematics, and technology (SMT) using its Tribal College and three school districts, implementing systemic initiatives that are changing the way SMT is being taught. This far-reaching, forward thinking program prepares young American Indian students for tomorrow’s science, mathematics and technology challenges. This program recognizes the need for advanced study in SMT in a wide range of professions needed in our communities -- teachers, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, bookkeepers, accountants, natural resource managers, and computer programmers. Priscilla Fairbanks of the Leech Lake Rural Systemic Initiative in Minnesota captured the true essence of this program when she said, “The philosophy is that if the significance of cultural values is emphasized within the initial course, then the students will learn how to apply this way of thinking for themselves in other classes and within life in general.” This initiative has been underway for a brief period of time, but data gathered and evaluations show significant change at all levels of learning and applications.

Family Support Services. Many Tribal College students have attempted college-level study at mainstream institutions and experienced intense frustration and isolation. Tribal Colleges succeed with these same students because they recognize the importance of individualized attention and they have learned that family support services are integral to the success of their students’ progress and success. Our colleges know the importance of viewing a student within his or her cultural and familial and community context. By their nature, our family support services and programs reach beyond the college student to impact the next generation. Efforts like these must be given more support by the federal and private sectors. For example, more than one-third of the Tribal Colleges provide on-site day care or preschool programs. Some highly successful examples of Tribal College programs include:

Partnerships with Early Head Start programs, such as the one at Cankdeska Cikana Community College in Spirit Lake, ND, which targets children between six weeks and three years old, providing them with nutritional and educational services. The program promotes family members pursuing higher education or developing careers, and many of the parents decide to attend the tribal college after their children are enrolled in the program. These new students say the availability of day care allows them to enroll in the college. More than half of the parents who

participated in the program in the last five years have graduated from the tribal college, completed vocational training and/or transferred to four-year institutions.

To help communities throughout North Dakota deal more effectively with troubled youth, United Tribes Technical College's Sacred Child program uses an innovative "wrap-around intervention" process, which is centered on the strengths of the child and family. The agencies collaborate with the family to meet the needs of the child, utilizing both the formal and informal support provided by trusted people within the extended family and community. The program is designed to keep children in their families and communities whenever possible, instead of having them sent away to Youth Correction Centers, the North Dakota State Hospital and foster care. Although Indian children compose only seven percent of the children in the state of North Dakota, they represent over 33 percent of the children in foster care, the State Hospital, and the youth Correctional Center. This program is funded by the Center for Mental Health Services within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and it is one of only three Native programs funded for this purpose in the nation.

Focusing on Whole Communities. Most Tribal Colleges are located on extremely remote reservations in isolated communities that lack the wide array of public services available in communities supported by strong state and local governments with access to stable tax support systems. Because they are true "community" colleges, Tribal Colleges offer a wide range of community services and serve as community focal points for all types of education, job training, child care, family and community support services. We serve as community centers, providing libraries, tribal archives, career centers, economic development centers, and public meeting places. In addition, other programs and services are designed so that children learn from their elders and entire families can participate in projects.

One avenue that has allowed Tribal Colleges to bolster "whole community" programs is the extension and equity grant program available to our institutions, after we achieved Federal Land-Grant Status in 1994. Many Tribal Colleges have used modest funding to develop innovative approaches, such as the "Cultivating Generations" project at Cheyenne River Community College in Eagle Butte, SD. A partnership with South Dakota State University Cooperative Extension Service, this project strengthens the college's ability to more effectively serve the Cheyenne River Reservation by managing and promoting community gardening and increasing economic activity related to horticultural products. Programs such as "Cultivating Generations" bring children in close contact with the elders of their communities in a manner that fosters learning from and about the generation that came before. It helps restore respect and appreciation for what elders have done in their lives and allows them a forum to pass their experience to the next generation of potential leaders.

Challenges to the Continued Success of Tribal Colleges and Universities.

Our colleges have succeeded in the face of tremendous hardship and within the context of extreme social and economic challenges, such as chronic underfunding, expanding enrollments, welfare reform, poor social conditions, and striving to serve students with low literacy levels.

These are challenges that need to be further supported by the private sector. Another important factor is that virtually no funding is available for Adult Education.

Limited Operational Funds and Expanding Enrollments. Tribal Colleges are committed to providing post-secondary access regardless of students' academic preparation level, yet we realize that it will become increasingly more difficult to do so in the years ahead, given that federal funding resources are not growing.

Enrollment at the Tribal Colleges is growing at an average rate of eight percent. We believe you can appreciate the impact this level of growth would have on any institution. The impact is even more dramatic on a Tribal College, because our core funding -- which Congress has not sufficiently increased in the past several years -- in effect decreases as student population grows. Despite a \$1.4 million increase in appropriations in FY99 under the Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act, funding to the colleges actually decreased from FY98 levels by \$53 per Indian student -- dropping from \$3,017 to \$2,964 per Indian student. This level is dramatically less than the average per student revenue of mainstream two-year institutions and it is also far below the authorized level of funding, which is \$6,000 per Indian student. If the FY99 level were to be maintained in the FY00 appropriations cycle, the colleges can expect to lose \$220 per Indian student, bring our per student allocation to devastating level.

Essentially, we must serve more and more students with a very limited amount of money. Many of the types of programs that the American Indian Education Foundation is expected to support currently exist at the TCUs, yet due to limited funding, these programs are in jeopardy of being cancelled. It seems a most reasonable and efficient solution to expand the eligibility criterion within the legislation to include some of the important approaches Tribal Colleges have worked so hard to develop.

The Impact of Isolation and Welfare Reform. As a result of welfare reform legislation, we expect that more and more welfare recipients will turn to Tribal Colleges for training and employment opportunities. We are currently undertaking a study to determine the extent to which our enrollment increases can be directly attributed to welfare reform. Over the next several years, we expect the demand for basic education and training services to increase dramatically.

In the isolated Indian communities we serve, current welfare recipients simply have no other place to turn. They must look to the local Tribal College for vitally needed -- and required -- education and job training. Where else are they to turn, many of whom have young children at home, going to turn to learn a productive skill, or earn a GED, or even learn to read? Job training and access to higher education is severely limited. There simply are no mainstream institutions. There are no private colleges or universities. There is no other place, but the Tribal College.

The latest welfare reform legislation requires persons receiving Federal assistance to become prepared for and find employment, or they will lose assistance under the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. What does this mean for Tribal Colleges? Fort Peck Community College, in Poplar, Montana, currently has an enrollment of about 360 students, of which 21 percent are non-Indian. When the first group of welfare recipients enrolled in Fort Peck

Community College in February 1997, less than 10 percent had high school diplomas. The basic literacy skills of many others were questionable. How are these individuals, who are willing and attempting to learn, going to become prepared for employment in less than two years? Who will bear the costs? Department of Interior core operational funding for Tribal Colleges is based on the number of American Indian students who meet certain basic literacy criteria. We do not receive operational funding for non-Indians or for basic and remedial adult education and GED programs. Including literacy and adult basic educational programs in the scope of the proposed Foundation's goals would serve two purposes. First, funds available through the American Indian Education Foundation for basic educational services could help those adults who were not well served by the K-12 educational experience of their youth; and, second, many of these adults now seeking help to acquire basis skills are parents and their children need to see the value of getting an education NOW.

Literacy and Low Educational Attainment Rates. Despite significant improvements in the last 25 years, national statistics show that Indian students continue to suffer from low expectations, high drop-out rates, and low academic achievement. Statistically, Indian students come in last in almost every area. For example, 30 percent of the eighth grade American Indian students dropped out by the end of their senior year in a study published in 1998 by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. (This compared with a dropout rate of 11 percent for the total 19,000 students sampled in this study.) The current educational system often fails to prepare students for being good citizens of their tribe and the nation.

"The tribal colleges invest valuable resources in cleaning up after the shortcomings of the existing K-12 schools by providing high school graduate equivalency training, remedial classes, and sometimes by providing alternative schools," a recent Tribal College Journal editorial noted. Tribal Colleges and Universities provide these programs and services-- in addition to the same academic, vocational, and technical programs found at mainstream institutions -- yet most of the colleges receive little if any funding for such programs. Several Tribal Colleges report that GED students represent one-third or more of the students they are serving. We provide these services because our mission requires us to help move American Indian people toward self-sufficiency and help make American Indians productive, tax-paying members of American society. Parents cannot help their children learn to read if they cannot read themselves. Children learn by example. When a child sees his or her parent learning to read or trying to better their life and the lives of their family through education, such as studying for attain their GED, they see a value put on education. A parent doing homework at the kitchen table may find that before long their children are joining them to do their own schoolwork. Striving for educational excellence and self-sufficiency becomes a "family affair."

Another issue that needs to be further explored is how will this new Foundation impact existing organizations that were established in the interest and promotion of Indian Education. When a question surfaced in the discussion surrounding this newly proposed American Indian Education Foundation as to whether it would serve postsecondary students, BIA officials answered that since postsecondary students are currently served by the American Indian College Fund, the new Foundation would focus on American Indian children and their families from birth

through age 18. We want to clarify that this assumption is not correct -- the American Indian College Fund's mission is to provide scholarships for students attending any of the 30 eligible member institutions of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. And due to limited funds, the College Fund estimates that these scholarships typically reach only 15 percent of the 25,000 students at our colleges. Therefore, we are concerned that the Foundation proposal could potentially impact Tribal Colleges in two ways: (1) with its restrictions against supporting postsecondary students, it will not provide much-needed support for the American Indian students at Tribal Colleges; and (2) the Foundation may lead to indirect competition for potential donors.

Recommendations

Given the above considerations, we believe the proposed concept and legislation should take the following into consideration, as next steps are determined:

The American Indian Education Foundation should support lifelong learning projects.

If the Foundation's programs remain focused on the elementary and secondary levels, the Board should consider funding only those projects that are linked to standards or school improvement and also funded partnerships with post-secondary and Pre-K.

Congress should ensure that it secures adequate input from the affected communities, such as school district officials and Indian educators, tribal governments, and Tribal College officials.

In addition, Congress should consider the potential impact the Foundation's creation might have on other Indian organizations and/or foundations.

Employ the Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities (13021) to leverage public/private partnerships through the White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities (WHITCU) Office and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium.

On behalf of all the AIHEC member institutions, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. We appreciate your Committee's long-standing support of Tribal Colleges, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to bring better education opportunities to all American Indian students of all ages.